Review: Caesar

by Peace Gardiner & Kevin Savetz

IMG Rating: 1.1

Type	Strategy Game
Publisher	Impressions Software (203/676-9002)
Retail Price	$59.95
Mail Order	$38.00
Requires	Mac II or higher with 2 MB free RAM, system 6.07 or higher, 256 color
Protection	None

Archival reconstruction from the original Inside Mac Games electronic magazine. Text, styling cues, and artwork were extracted from the original Macintosh resources; the flowing PDF layout is new. Source: December 1993 floppy-era issue preserved in the 1993-1995 issue bundle.

When Did My City Burn Down, And Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me? This is just one of the notes I jotted down as I played Impressions' version of historical city planning in Caesar. According to the box-top, the basic idea behind Caesar is "Rome wasn't built in a day—how long will it take you?" However, after playing this game the question should be, "Why bother?"

As a big fan of Maxis' line of Sim games (SimCity, SimLife, etc.,) I was very excited at the opportunity to see SimCity with a more historical slant. I tried to enjoy myself during the first hours of playing Caesar. Maybe I had high expectations going in, but I was soon frustrated with all the bugs in the game and avoided it like the very plagues that occurred in Caesar's time.

The goal of the game is to turn barren land into a thriving ancient city. You can build forums, Oracles, bath houses, living quarters, marketplaces, and other city structures. Like SimCity, you must balance the needs of the people with a limited income. Caesar includes elements missing from other city simulations. For instance, barbarians from other areas can attack your city — you may build up legions of soldiers (cohorts) to protect yourself. Although this element may be realistic to the times, managing armies, fortifying towns, and watching battles belongs in a game like Risk, not a city planning game. Caesar tries to do both, but does neither well.

Roman leaders meet to discuss the politics of the day.

Original artwork embedded with this review.

There are some interesting challenges in this game. In Maxis' games you can only choose an easy, medium, or hard game. Caesar adds to your control by offering an easy-medium-hard skill level choice as well as a variable starting bank account. So, you can vary the game's difficulty by choosing how much money to begin with. There are several structures that I enjoyed on this game: you can choose schools, hospitals, temples, oracles, and theaters — an entire group of options unavailable on SimCity. However, once your buildings are on the map, good luck identifying them. The blocky graphics leave much to be desired, making it difficult to tell just what you've built. There is no function to reveal exactly what a certain structure is.

Petty Stuff? I hate to be picky, but has anyone at Impressions ever used a dictionary? The documentation was okay, but the game itself is harbors spelling errors! I found two notable on-screen typos: POTERRY (pottery) —and the more creative error: in the Tribunal of Plebs (where it lists how many serfs are allocated to various duties about the city) the leftover number of plebs is titled "UNSUED PLEBS." (As if this had anything to do with litigation.)

Had enough? There are a plethora of other bugs in Caesar.

1. Scroll bars do not coincide with the scrolling image. When you reach the "bottom" of the world, the vertical scroll bar stops only halfway down the screen, not at the bottom where it should be.

2. I heard sounds only sporadically during game play. The music wasn't missed, but subtle auditory clues —for instance the "Poof!" that is the only cue that somewhere, something in your city has caught fire — were mostly absent. While you casually build roads in one corner of the city, somewhere else, Rome burns.

3. I never did figure out if there was a way to see the entire empire at once from an overhead view. Instead, you can only see a few city blocks at a time. If you are lucky enough to hear the sound of a fire starting, you must scan the country by scrolling. There is no "go to" command and no countrywide overhead view.

4. That window-resizer gadget looks mighty tempting, but it doesn't do anything. You can't adjust the window size to fit your screen.

5. The biggest challenge in this game was remembering how to save it. The instructions indicate this is done using a toolbar icon resembling a floppy disk. However, I didn't have one. After losing two separate cities to unsuccessful save-game attempts, I figured out how to save the game (in a manner totally undocumented in the manual.) To make matters worse, the default save file name was the same as the name of the game application, causing the save file to be written over the game — you get the idea. Also, if you quit a game in progress, it doesn't ask you if you want to save it first.

6. It’s really, really slow.

The chunky graphics, numerous bugs, and slow speed are Caesar's worst nightmare.

Original artwork embedded with this review.

Let’s Stop For A Rest. I could go on and on listing bugs (did I mention the trail of dead cursors left behind when you move the mouse?), but the bottom line is this: Caesar for the Macintosh seems to be no more than an afterthought to the IBM version. (The game’s registration card doesn’t even have a check box for “Macintosh” under “Which computer system do you own?”) I’m sure PC users think the blocky, undefined graphics are superb, but loyal Mac users will find the graphics disappointing. Caesar includes many fine ideas for a city planning simulation, but the Macintosh implementation is a poorly conceived, buggy port that isn’t worth your time or money.

Pros

- Good concept
- No copy protection

Cons

- Bugs galore
- Blocky graphics
- Very slow